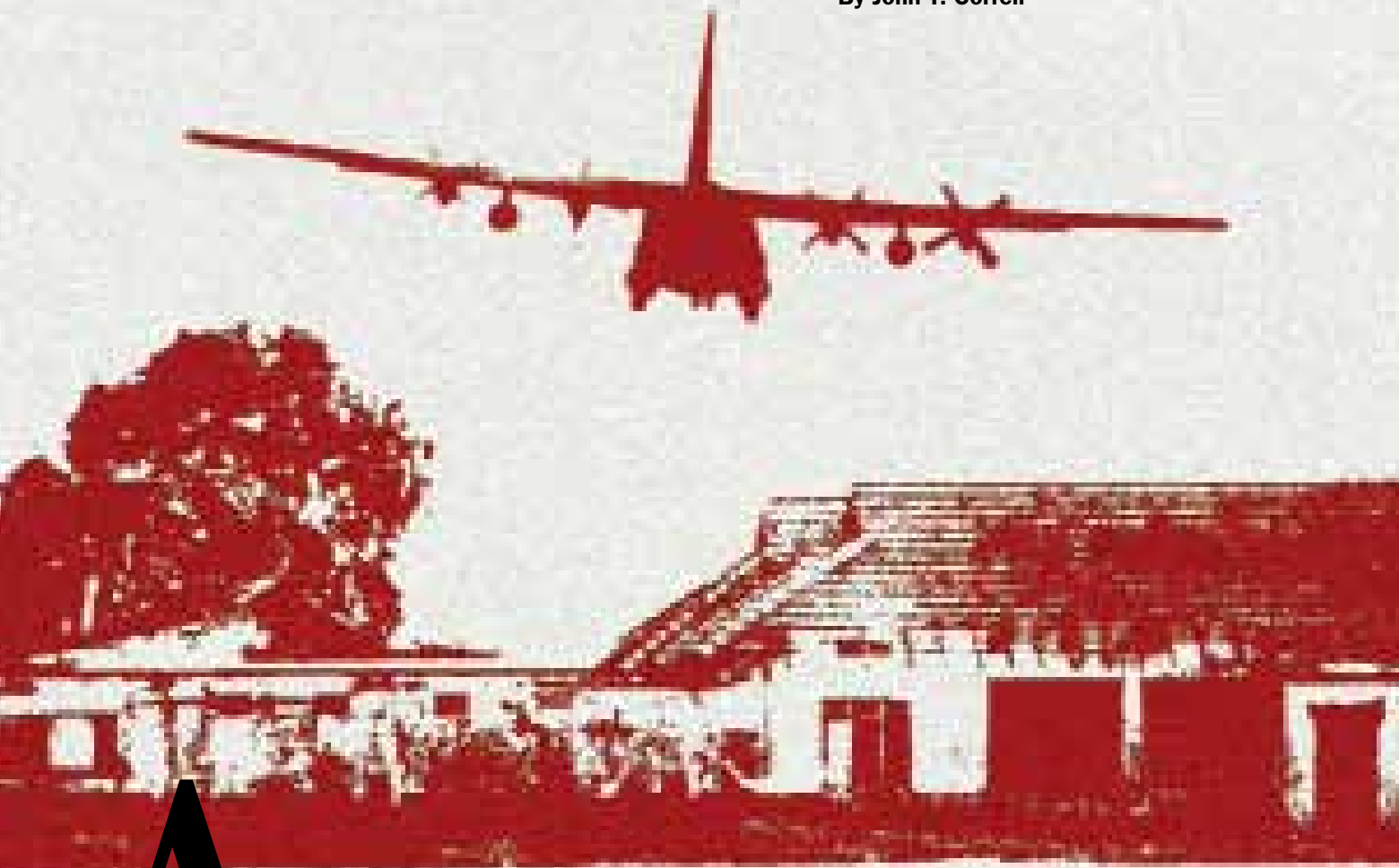


The fate of the hostages rode with a C-130 descending out of the night sky with its lights off.

ENTEBBE

By John T. Correll



Air France flight 139 originated in Tel Aviv on Sunday morning, June 27, 1976, bound for Paris with an intermediate stop in Athens. Airport security in Athens was notoriously lax. No one was on duty at the metal detector, and the official checking carry-on luggage at the X-ray machine was not watching the screen.

Four passengers from a connecting flight from Bahrain—a German man and

woman and two Palestinian men—had no difficulty boarding with concealed handguns and hand grenades. The aircraft, an Airbus 300, left Athens at 12:20 p.m.

Seven minutes out of Athens, the German man forced his way onto the flight deck while his companions took over the passenger cabins. They declared the hijacking to be on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and forced the pilot, Capt. Michel Bacos, to turn southward.

Loss of radio contact and the change in course alerted Israel that the flight, with a large number of Israeli and Jewish passengers, had been hijacked. The aircraft diverted to Benghazi, Libya, where it refueled and took off again at 9:50 p.m. One of the passengers, a woman, faked a medical emergency and managed to talk her way off the airplane in Benghazi and escape the hijackers.

The Airbus landed at Entebbe airport in Uganda at 3:15 a.m. on Monday. On



board, in addition to the four hijackers, were 243 passengers and the Air France crew of 12. At least six more terrorists joined the operation, coming from the Popular Front's forward location in Mogadishu, Somalia, bringing more lethal weapons, including AK-47 assault rifles.

At midday on Monday, the hostages were moved from the airplane to the dilapidated old airport terminal, which had been used as a warehouse since a

new terminal and runway were built in the early 1970s. Ugandan soldiers pointed their guns at the passengers. It was soon obvious that Ugandan President Idi Amin was not only supporting the Popular Front operation but also was an active participant in it. A terrorist relief team took over guarding the hostages while the original hijackers rested.

It was not until 3:30 p.m. Tuesday that the Popular Front announced its

demands, broadcast over Ugandan radio. Unless 53 terrorists—40 of them held by Israel and the others by West Germany, Kenya, France, and Switzerland—were freed by 2 p.m. (Israeli time) on Thursday, the hostages would be executed.

Israel had faced the seizure of hostages before, and its policy was to do everything possible to free them through direct action, rather than give in to demand for release of terrorists.



Several times in the past, however, terrorists had gotten what they wanted. In the hijacking of an El Al airliner in 1968, the Israelis traded 15 terrorists for the hostages. In another instance, they gave up 50 terrorists for two Israelis taken off a TWA airliner at Damascus.

Results from military action in hostage situations had varied. In 1972, terrorists captured a Sabena airliner, landed in Tel Aviv, and demanded the release of 317 Fedayeen “freedom fighters.”

Israeli soldiers disguised as mechanics killed two hijackers and wounded a third in a 90-second assault. All 101 hostages were freed except for a

woman who jumped up in panic and was shot and killed.

By contrast, the attempt by Israeli special forces in 1974 to free 88 hostages, mostly children, held by Palestinian terrorists at a school in the Israeli town of Ma’alot was a disaster. All of the terrorists were killed, but so were 22 children, with another 56 wounded.

When the terrorists announced their demands in Entebbe, the Israeli Cabinet came under intense pressure from the families of the hostages, who wanted Israel to agree right away with the exchange.

Meanwhile in Entebbe, the hostages were crowded into a confined space

in the old terminal, where primitive conditions worsened as the plumbing clogged and backed up. Idi Amin arrived by helicopter on Monday afternoon for the first of several visits. He told the hostages the crisis was Israel’s fault for not agreeing to demands of the hijackers. He insisted on being addressed as “His Excellency Field Marshal Doctor Idi Amin Dada.”

Amin, who took power in a 1971 coup, gave the impression of being a strutting buffoon who decorated his uniform with medals and honors he awarded to himself, but he was deadly dangerous. Already, tens of thousands were dead in his purges and sweeps of repression. The Israelis, who conducted training for the Ugandan armed forces from 1963 to 1972, knew him well. He had fallen out with the Israelis and ejected them when they refused to help him attack Tanzania and Kenya.

The terrorists collected passports and other documents and separated the Jewish passengers from the non-Jews. On Wednesday afternoon, they released 47 hostages, mostly French. Captain Bacos declined release so long as any of his passengers were detained, and at his urging, the Air France crew did likewise.

That night, Israeli agents visited the freed hostages in France and gathered information about the situation in Entebbe.

Another 101 hostages were released on Thursday morning, leaving only the 95 Israeli and Jewish passengers and the Air France crew in captivity.

Getting There

The Israeli Defense Forces could attempt a rescue, but unless they could land and take the old terminal by surprise, the hijackers would kill the hostages. The rescue force could very well be lost as well.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had been IDF chief of staff during the Six Day War in 1967, was reluctant to mount a military operation, as was his chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Mordechai Gur. The main advocate of a military response was the defense minister, Shimon Peres, who was not a military man, having risen instead through civilian government ranks. Maj. Gen. Benny Peled, commander of the Israeli Air Force, agreed with Peres on military action.

As deliberations continued, the armed forces explored several ideas, including a parachute drop into Lake

Victoria, adjacent to Entebbe, with troops coming ashore in rubber boats. Whatever was decided, the Israeli air force could get them there. The C-130 Hercules, called Karnaf, or “Rhinceros,” in Israeli service, could reach Entebbe without difficulty. When Israel had maintained a large presence in Uganda, the IAF used C-130s for regular supply runs.

The problem, in addition to achieving surprise, was refueling. After landing, the C-130s would have only enough fuel remaining to fly another one-and-a-half hours. There was a chance that Kenya might allow them to refuel in Nairobi on the way out, but more likely, the C-130s would have to rob fuel from the storage tanks at Entebbe.

From their time in Uganda, the Israelis had some knowledge of the fuel system at the airport. Furthermore, the old terminal had been built by an Israeli construction firm, which still had the blueprints and gave them to the government. Additional information came from the intelligence agency Mossad, which rented a light airplane in Nairobi, and faking an in-flight emergency, circled the Entebbe airport taking pictures.

Brig. Gen. Dan Shomron, head of infantry and paratroop command, said the big question was whether the IAF could insert his force without alarming the terrorists. “From the moment that we will be on the ground in Entebbe, we can carry it out easily,” he said.

With no firm plan yet in hand by Thursday afternoon, 90 minutes before expiration of the ultimatum, Israel

Yoni Netanyahu was 30 years old when he led the raid on Entebbe. He was the only member of the rescue team killed in the successful rescue of more than 100 hostages.



announced it would negotiate for the release of the hostages. The terrorists set a new deadline for 2 p.m. on Sunday.

Later that evening, the IDF came up with its plan, devised with substantial inputs from Peled and Shomron, to land a combined force at Entebbe for a surprise attack at night. The insertion force was pared down to four C-130s. The plan was called Operation Thunderbolt. Maj. Gen. Yekutiel Adam, chief of operations and number two man in the IDF, would be the overall commander. Shomron was appointed ground commander.

Yoni and the Unit

The central role in the assault fell to the special forces unit of the Israeli Army, Sayeret Matkal, known as “the Unit.” Its commander was Lt. Col. Jonathan Netanyahu, 30, called “Yoni,” who had been in the position for a little more than a year. Initially,

Shomron named Col. Ehud Barak, the highly experienced former commander of the Unit, to lead the assault on the old terminal with Yoni serving under him, but on Friday evening Adam sent Barak to Kenya to seek permission for post-mission landing and refueling, so Netanyahu was in clear command.

Yoni and his assault force of 29 would be on the first C-130. They would be wearing Ugandan Army uniforms, but they had to reach the old terminal quickly, before the operation was discovered. The C-130 could not get too close without being seen or heard, so they had a considerable distance to go after deplaning.

The C-130 could carry three vehicles, which suggested a motorcade that looked like something it wasn't. Idi Amin was known to travel in a black Mercedes limousine, accompanied by several escort vehicles. He had visited the hostages several times, and another visit was not implausible.

The Unit decided to use a Mercedes and two Land Rovers to get from the C-130 to the terminal. The Mercedes they obtained, however, was white, believed to be the wrong color, and was hastily repainted black.

Unknown to the Israelis, Idi Amin was now using a white Mercedes instead of a black one. The Unit made fake license plates from cardboard and little flags to fly on the front of the car, as seen in pictures of Amin's Mercedes.

The IDF staged a dry run rehearsal of the landing Friday night at Ophir, on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula.

The IAF would use seven aircraft for the operation, two Boeing 707s and five C-130s. The 707s, with El Al airline markings and civilian registration numbers, would fly the standard

Corbis photo by David Rubinger



A jubilant crowd lifts an unidentified member of the rescue team into the air during the celebrations at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv.



L-r: Ben Zion Netanyahu, Yoni's father, Defense Minister Shimon Peres, and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, at Yoni Netanyahu's funeral ceremony in Jerusalem in 1976.

commercial route toward South Africa. The first 707 was the command and control aircraft, with Adam and Peled aboard. The second was configured as a field hospital. In their civilian guise, both could refuel at Nairobi.

The C-130s staged out of Ophir, the southernmost airfield in Israel, and topped off their tanks there for the 2,500-mile flight. Tight security slipped when the pilot of an airplane belonging to Arkia, Israel's domestic airline, noticed the activity at Ophir and commented on an open frequency, "Looks like there's a party going on down there." Fortunately, it led to no harm.

The first Karnaf was in the air at 3:30 p.m. Saturday, followed at regular intervals by the others. The Cabinet was still debating the issue and had not reached a decision to approve the mission when the C-130s launched. There was some expectation among the assault force that the aircraft would be recalled.

Hercules One carried Yoni and his 29 troopers, their Mercedes and two Land Rovers, ground commander Shomron, and 52 paratroopers. The next two aircraft each carried two armed jeeps, and more soldiers and paratroopers, and one also carried Shomron's command jeep. Hercules Four was the hostage transport. It also brought the medical team, a portable fuel pump mounted on a pickup truck, and a 10-man IAF refueling team. In all, Shomron's assault force numbered about 170.

The C-130s flew the length of the Red Sea at 200 feet to evade Saudi and Egyptian radars, then crossed Ethiopia—

which had no radar that could track the C-130s at night—at 20,000 feet, which used less fuel. Operation Thunderbolt did not receive final authorization from the full Israeli Cabinet until the C-130s were over Ethiopia. The C-130s crossed western Kenya and reached Lake Victoria about 10:30 p.m. They were now out of radio range of the Arab countries, so Hercules One made first radio contact with the Boeing 707 command aircraft.

Out of the Night

Hercules One approached Entebbe from the south and lined up on the main runway, which ran along the western side of the airport. Flying without lights, the C-130 could not be seen from the ground. The crew could see the new terminal and control tower off to their right and beyond that, the lights of the old terminal, where the hostages were held. It was on a ramp off the old runway, which ran the width of the airport on a southeast-northwest diagonal. A mile-and-a-half to the east, a military airstrip lay along the far side of the airport, with five MiG-21s and three MiG-17s parked nearby.

Hercules One touched down unseen at 11:01 p.m., Israeli time—just after midnight in Uganda. The pilot cut inboard engines to reduce noise and taxied onto an access strip connecting to the diagonal runway. Paratroopers hopped out to place emergency landing beacons for use by the other C-130s if the runway lights were turned off.

The Mercedes and the Land Rovers, carrying Yoni's party, headed down the runway toward the old terminal, about a mile away. They drove with

lights on and at about 40 mph, hoping to look like a presidential motorcade. Just before they reached the old control tower, a Ugandan Army sentry pointed his rifle at them and tried to stop them. The sentry knew, perhaps, that the black Mercedes was not Idi Amin's car. They had to shoot their way through and immediately came under fire from the old control tower. They charged the last 30 feet on foot.

The hostages were on the ground floor, guarded by seven terrorists and dozens of Ugandan soldiers. The terrorists were momentarily confused, uncertain why the Ugandans were shooting. In the rapid exchange of gunfire that ensued, four terrorists on the ground floor were killed, but one of them hit Netanyahu in the chest with a burst from his AK-47. His wound was mortal, and he died as the Unit doctor tried to revive him.

The assault team spread out through the building, where they found and killed three more terrorists. Two hostages were also killed, one in the crossfire and the other when he leapt up unexpectedly at the sight of Israeli forces.

Hercules Two was on the ground at 11:06 p.m. Hercules Three was close behind, landing with the emergency beacons when the runway lights went out suddenly while the C-130 was on final approach. As paratroopers secured the new terminal and control tower, where resistance was light, the four armed jeeps, commanded by Maj. Shaul Mofaz, raced down the diagonal runway. They took up a blocking position in front of the military base and strafed the MiGs with their swivel-mounted machine guns. Several of the MiGs exploded and all eight were destroyed. The jeeps also suppressed fire from the top of the control tower, raking it with bullets each time the Ugandans put their heads up.

No additional Ugandan troops joined the fight. Idi Amin and his senior officers did not know what was going on. Possibly, it was a coup. Idi Amin took shelter and the others holed up until the situation was clear.

"No officers wanted to risk becoming involved with the wrong side," said Henry Kyemba, a minister in Amin's government.

Hercules Four taxied into position near the old terminal to take the hostages aboard. One was missing. On Friday, 75-year-old Dora Bloch, choking on a piece of meat, had been taken to a hospital in Kampala, 21 miles away, and she



was still there. The other 104 scrambled aboard the C-130, which would also carry the bodies of Netanyahu and the two dead hostages.

The IAF technicians were preparing to pump fuel from the airport tanks when Peled sent word from the command and control aircraft that the C-130s could refuel in Nairobi. Hercules Four was the first out.

The last aircraft, Hercules Two, lifted off at 12:40 a.m., Israeli time, on Sunday July 4—an hour and 39 minutes after the first C-130 had landed.

When they got to Nairobi, all concerned tried to make the situation as unexceptional as possible. The IDF's "Entebbe Diary" said, "Without any fuss, fuel tankers moved into position by the planes and began refueling, while the drivers presented the paperwork to their pilots for signature, just as they would to any commercial flight. No questions were asked, and no information volunteered."

One of the hostages, seriously wounded in Entebbe, was taken to a Nairobi hospital, but did not recover from surgery. The immediate fatalities from the raid were three hostages, 20 Ugandan soldiers, seven hijackers, and Yoni Netanyahu.

Idi Amin added to that by having four flight controllers executed summarily

for their failure to see the approaching C-130s.

His thugs also dragged Dora Bloch out of her hospital bed and killed her.

The C-130s were met en route by Israeli fighters and escorted to Tel Nof Air Base south of Tel Aviv. After debriefing, they went on to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, where a huge reception awaited.

The raid went down in military lore and legend, and Operation Thunderbolt was renamed Operation Jonathan in honor of the fallen commander. Three movies were subsequently made about the mission, and there have been numerous articles and books, notable among them *Entebbe: The Jonathan Netanyahu Story* in 2003 by Yoni's brother, Iddo.

Uganda asked the United Nations Security Council to condemn Israel's action. The UN declined to pass a resolution condemning either Israel or Uganda, but Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim of Austria felt compelled to say that the raid was "a serious violation of the national sovereignty of a United Nations member state," meaning Uganda.

For staying with the passengers and urging other crew members to do likewise instead of accepting release, Bacos was reprimanded and suspended from duty by Air France.

History was not quite finished with some of the principals in the Entebbe

operation. Rabin returned for another term as prime minister in 1992. He was assassinated in 1995, and was succeeded by Peres (who had earlier been prime minister 1984-86). Peres was followed by Benjamin Netanyahu—Yoni's younger brother—who was prime minister from 1996 to 1999.

Adam, commander of the overall operation, was killed in action in Lebanon in 1982. The ground commander, Shomron, subsequently became IDF chief of staff. Barak, the former commander of Sayeret Matkal and emissary to Kenya to arrange for landing and refueling, was prime minister of Israel from 1999 to 2001. Mofaz, who commanded the contingent of armed jeeps at Entebbe, went on to be IDF chief of staff and defense minister.

Benjamin Netanyahu is currently prime minister of Israel, Peres is president, and Barak is defense minister.

Idi Amin continued as dictator of Uganda until he was ousted in 1979. He fled to Libya and then to Saudi Arabia, where he died in 2003. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a frequent contributor editor. His most recent article, "Etchberger, Medal of Honor," appeared in the November issue.